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Topic: Military affairs and the nomination hearing of Robert Gates to be director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Guests: Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and former CIA director William Webster.

September 15, 1991

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MR. UTLEY: This past week, Secretary of State James Baker found himself at a strange place--inside the headquarters of the KGB in Moscow having a friendly chat with the head of the Soviet secret police--yet another sign of how times are changing. And as the KGB changes, if the Soviet Union is no longer the threat it was, what about the CIA? What is the need for and the role of it? That's one of the questions that will be asked of Robert Gates when he faces the Senate hearings this week to be confirmed as the new director of the CIA.

And also what about the military--the amount of money spent on it? Questions on that are being heard with greater frequency.

We want to get some answers today from our guests--in a moment Senator Sam Nunn--but first from William Webster who's just stepped down as director of the CIA. And joining me at the table today are Elizabeth Drew of the New Yorker and Andrea Mitchell who's NBC chief congressional correspondent.

Mr. Webster, thanks for coming in. I guess you're enjoying the post-CIA days relaxing right now. But let me ask you some questions about what you learned on duty there.

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As we just mentioned, a couple of days ago, James Baker met with the head of the KGB in Moscow, Vadim Bakatin. And Bakatin asked a very interesting question to Mr. Baker: who's the enemy now? And if we aren't enemies, shouldn't perhaps the KGB and the CIA stop spying on each so much? What's your answer?

MR. WEBSTER: Well, I'll tell you the question of who are our enemies is changing in a rapidly changing world. I think the enemies are not necessarily going to be particular countries but particular issues which, in a well-guided foreign policy and in cooperation with the Soviet Union, we can both do something about them. And the issues that I'd suggest for consideration are the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, biological, chemical, nuclear warheads, and the missile delivery systems, for one.

MR. UTLEY: But specifically you talk about cooperation--that's the word you just used with the Soviet Union. If there is to be this cooperation which the Soviets clearly want, would you agree that it is time that the CIA reduce its espionage, its intelligence-gathering activities vis-a-vis the Soviet Union and specifically the KGB?

MR. WEBSTER: Well, in this context, espionage is a kind of a pejorative word. The function of intelligence is to understand what is going on so that our policy makers can make wise decisions in the interest of our country. I think now more than ever we need to understand some very complex changes that are rapidly occurring in the world. The shifts occur, the diminution of the ground threat of the Soviet Union is clearly cause for less input from the intelligence community.

On the other hand, the political, military and economic changes require more.

MR. UTLEY: I understand what you're saying but let me try once more on the specific issue, what the head of the KGB said--that the CIA should reduce its spying against the KGB, the KGB should reduce its spying against the CIA. Do you agree with that?

MR. WEBSTER: I think that remains to be seen. The KGB is changing dramatically internally. The report that I have is that there has yet been not dramatic change externally, and externally means the United States and other places around the world. We need to understand what they're doing.

Now, intelligence plays a role in arms control. We need to understand whether there's cheating or not. That comes

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from collection, whether you call it espionage or open source or other methods. It's understanding through information.

MR. UTLEY: But let's be specific about this again in your CIA position, there's been no diminution of KGB spying against the United States, against--

MR. WEBSTER: Well, that's my understanding from the FBI.

MRS. DREW: When you say there are new issues, Judge Webster, does this mean that we might need new kinds of people and new kinds of expertise at the CIA--people, for instance, who know more about science and technology and economics?

MR. WEBSTER: I think there will be some of that, Elizabeth. I also think there will be some retraining, greater emphasis on certain kinds of languages where we've been short before because our focus was so intensely against the Soviet Union over the years. But we've started those changes. Those changes have been in train for a number of years, and we're going to have to accelerate them as we go forward.

We're going to use outside people, not necessarily inside people, to provide our information that adds to our own analytical capabilities.

MRS. DREW: Does that mean you might be able to reduce your personnel?

MR. WEBSTER: Well, we've already seen signs that our personnel will be reduced by the rather extensive cuts in the defense budget. I think realistically that will happen over time. But it would be, I think, a tragedy to lose special skills in some kind of crash program.

MRS. DREW: Now, your last answer to Garrick about whether we should reduce spying or information gathering about the KGB was ``that remains to be seen.'' Does that mean that, in your mind, it's not necessarily a settled that the Soviet Union or former Soviet Union is less of a threat than it was two weeks, three weeks ago?

MR. WEBSTER: Well, there are different kinds of threats. And I think the Soviet Union has, over time, lowered its threat as a military opponent, given that it still possesses its strategic weapons. But the instability that is taking place in the Soviet Union could be a threat to our national security, if things go wrong. We need to be on top of those situations.

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We're always criticized for not having gauged the precise moment when something dramatic happens. But it is important for us to be on top of them and it takes time and ability and effort to achieve and maintain that capability.

MS. MITCHELL: Judge Webster, Bob Gates, you were his boss, he was deputy, you've worked with him for many years. He is described by everyone who knows him as an incredibly well-organized person. How could he not remember that Richard Kerr, now the acting CIA director, told him months before it was disclosed about the Iran-contra diversion?

MR. WEBSTER: Well, I think Bob Gates can answer that question for himself. I know from my own experience how much information came across my desk each day, and how much more actually came across the deputy's desk who had to screen some of the information in order that the director could do other things.

MS. MITCHELL: Is it credible that he would forget something of that kind of importance?

MR. WEBSTER: Let me put it this way. I have known Bob Gates for close to ten years. I've worked with him directly for four years. And if Bob Gates says he forgot it, I believe him.

MS. MITCHELL: When he was your deputy, did you cut him out of the loop as he indicates Casey did? Did you work around him? Is that the way CIA directors work with their deputies?

MR. WEBSTER: Well, I think each director has his own style. And partly because of the issues that you've been talking about, I made it a point to make my deputy a partner, both Bob Gates and his successor, Dick Kerr. That's the way I preferred to do it. I felt that I needed his wisdom and his knowledge. But other directors don't always feel that way.

MS. MITCHELL: Quickly--one of the issues that is going to be raised against him, particularly by Senator Bradley, is that when he worked for you, he suppressed Soviet intelligence reports to better fit his harsh view of the Soviet Union. Did he slant or tailor these intelligence assessments?

MR. WEBSTER: Certainly not to my knowledge. I do not think that happened in any respect. You'll always have people--because we encourage diversity of opinion, you'll always have people who feel that their opinions didn't reach the top. But we set in place very carefully--and Bob was my partner in this--procedures in the intelligence community to be sure that I, as director of Central Intelligence, and his as deputy director did not influence the outcome.

It was like voting in the Supreme Court. We established the terms of reference, but I did not declare myself until every member of the intelligence community had participated in that result.

I don't know of anyone who has said in the last four years that the CIA was guilty of cooking the books. We did everything that we could to achieve an objective result. Now some may say that weakened it, but it was objective. And that was important.

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MR. UTLEY: All right. Times have changed again. Coming back to the questions, many questions have been raised about reorganizing the CIA, cutting its budget. Senator Moynihan, for one, has gone to the extreme as saying get rid of the CIA, incorporate it into other intelligence agencies, into the State Department.

It's estimated that your budget is about $25 to $30 billion a year--it is a secret. Don't you think the time has come now to make the budget of the CIA public?

MR. WEBSTER: Well, the number that you're using is an inaccurate one if you talk about my budget because a very significant part of the budget was controlled entirely by the Pentagon.

Is the question should we cut the budget?

MR. UTLEY: Oh, cut the budget and also be more open with the public as to what we are spending on the CIA because now the Cold War is over. Why not tell the people?

MR. WEBSTER: I think everyone would like to see more openness. The question from the standpoint of protecting sources and methods--and that's the statutory responsibility of the DCI, the Director of Central Intelligence--once you announce in figures, the public has a right to say how did you get to those in figures. And then, as you begin to peel the onion, you come dangerously close to disclosing sources and methods.

MS. DREW: Judge Webster, if, as reported, the CIA did not predict the Soviet Union's release of the Eastern European countries, did not predict the economic collapse of the Soviet Union, did not predict the collapse of communism, is it a fair criticism to say they missed some big ones or are people expecting too much of it?

MR. WEBSTER: It's important to understand that there are limitations to intelligence. I don't concede all the list that you gave, Elizabeth. Predicting precise moments is very difficult.

MS. DREW: I didn't say precise moments, but tell us if these were going to happen really soon.

MR. WEBSTER: It seems to me that the intelligence that I saw was entirely consistent with what was taking place at the time you described it. The awareness of the movement toward the unification of Germany, the Soviet Union's inability--Gorbachev's inability to challenge Eastern Europe at the risk of glasnost--all those were carefully recorded. The movement from the right was contemplated just a few days before it happened.

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MR. UTLEY: Let's talk about your role on the Intelligence Committee. The Robert Gates hearings start now this week. Will he be confirmed as you see it now?

SENATOR NUNN: I believe that the question on Mr. Gates's confirmation depends on whether we conclude that he is trustworthy--that's the bottom line. I think he's well-qualified, he's a professional; I've had a high regard for him over the years. If he comes across as credible in terms of his past activities and also of course projects the future role of the agency for what I guess is now being called the post-Cold War era, then I think he will be confirmed. If there is a credibility problem, he could be in trouble.

MR. UTLEY: But you sound as if you are skeptical about Gates right now on the eve of these hearings.

SENATOR NUNN: I'm not skeptical, I have a lot of questions. There are a lot of questions that come up when you're in a high position in the CIA during Iran-contra and you seemingly don't know what's going on. That raises all sorts of questions. But I would like to be able to vote for him because I have regard for him personally.

MR. UTLEY: Andrea.

MS. MITCHELL: What about his credibility? How could he not have done, how could he have forgotten this warning, a series of warnings, at least four such instances when he was alerted to the possibility of problems and a diversion of funds?

SENATOR NUNN: Andrea, that's what we'll have to wrestle with next week. A lot of unusual things happened when Bill Casey was director of the CIA. We do not know how much Mr. Gates was in the loop and how much he was cut out of the loop.

MS. MITCHELL: Yes, but in this one instance we do know that the acting director now, Richard Kerr, talked to him in August of 1986 and Mr. Gates somehow can't remember that conversation.

SENATOR NUNN: Well, that will be a good question, but I'm going to reserve judgment on it until I hear from Mr. Gates.

MS. MITCHELL: What about the other aspects of Iran-contra? There were intercepts that he should have been seeing, National Security Agency intercepts. Either he knew and was covering up, or some would suggest he was not smart enough, too insensitive to be confirmed as director. Aren't those the two choices?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, of course, as Director Webster just said a minute ago, in his case the deputy sees a lot more than the director, because one of the deputy's jobs under Bill Webster has been to screen so that less gets to the director's desk. Now, it may be that the opposite of that was true in the Casey case--maybe he saw more than the deputy, but that gets to the heart of the question.

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MS. MITCHELL: Are you concerned, though, that the agency is so demoralized by the indictments of former officials and that there is a lot of anger against Gates, in fact, from inside the agency among a certain group? Is he the right man, then, to take over an agency that is in deep trouble?

SENATOR NUNN: The confirmation will probably turn on his credibility, but the real future in the CIA is what we ought to be focusing on more than anything else. What is the role in the post- Cold War era? It's not enough to have satellites flying over the Soviet Union when there are now all sorts of republics with separate problems, separate ethnic problems, all sorts of minority problems, and massive economic problems.

We can't tell about the world anymore today by simply technical means than we can tell about the gross national product of the United States by technical means, so we're going to have to change the nature of the agency. That ought to be our primary focus, of course, along with the credibility question.

MR. UTLEY: Elizabeth.

MS. DREW: Another criticism of Mr. Gates, before we move off that, is that he tailored the information or intelligence to his own point of view about the Soviet Union, a point of view which some would say has not been borne out by events. Do you think that that is an appropriate role for a high official of the CIA?

SENATOR NUNN: No. The main thing we need the CIA for is independence because they don't have line responsibility like the Pentagon, and the reason the CIA was created to begin with was to give us an independent group of people who are supposed to give us objective facts and not be colored by policy or ideology. That will be a very serious question.

But there is another side of that story. We just had a fine young man on my Armed Services staff by the name of Doug George who died of cancer. He was the top CIA analyst and intelligence gatherer on strategic weapons for years when the controversies were raging. He told me personally right before he died that Bob Gates never ever in any way asked him to tilt any assessment other than factual. So we have two sides of that one.

MR. UTLEY: Back now, Elizabeth and Andrea. I think most Americans have this sort of fuzzy image of the CIA. We know the three initials, we know they do a lot of spying, analysis--and not much more about them.

But what have you picked up over the years as to what

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the CIA really--it's condition today, its problems and what it needs to become?

MS. MITCHELL: I think, Garrick, first of all, the CIA is only one part and not even the biggest part of our intelligence gathering. It is an agency, though, in deep trouble right now. The indictments of former officials has really sent out a signal to the people in the agency that they are in conflict with their mission as they saw it, which is to protect secrets, and the other legal obligation to tell Congress what they're doing.

So there is terrible demoralization. Pat Moynihan of course has said let's get rid of the agency.

MR. UTLEY: That's in the bureaucracy, but in terms of what it does, Elizabeth, and what it's going to have to do in the future, Senator Nunn said, hey, we have to look at this again.

MS. DREW: I'm not sure you can separate the question of mission from the question of the bureaucracy. This is a point about Washington, not just about the CIA. It's one thing to sit on a Sunday morning show and say we have to change its mission, we have to look at this and look at that very, very hard to take an organization this big that's been functioning on a certain set of assumptions for nearly 50 years, and say, okay, fellas, think differently, let's get rid of some departments, let's bring in a whole new group of people.

They just finished, you know, a brand new enormous building, additional building in Langley--

MS. MITCHELL: It's not going to happen, and in fact, the reformers in Congress they can't break through that bureaucracy--

MR. UTLEY: Hard to change the old habits.

MS. MITCHELL: --that the military and civilian agencies will keep fighting with each other, and they have very little prospect of changing.

MR. UTLEY: Bureaucracies have a way of living on.